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RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2528
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2143
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 6995
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000110

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SUBJECT: AUTONOMOUS UNIONS AND STUDENTS TEST THE LIMITS

Classified By: CDA, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Thousands of middle and high school students across Algeria took to the streets in a nationwide strike starting on January 15, heeding the call of autonomous unions. The strike resulted in a near complete paralysis of the education system for more than five days across the entire country. The students went back to class after the Ministry of National Education promised to meet and negotiate on January 26, although a recently announced nationwide general strike for February 10-12 will provide an opportunity for students to return to the streets. The strike reflected an unprecedented amount of coordination among disparate groups and was not officially sanctioned by the government. However, the government response was measured and, for the most part, not overtly confrontational. Some believe that the government response was deliberate and designed to reflect an air of kindness before a proposed amendment to the constitution to permit a third term for President Bouteflika. Others note that the strike reflected the good organization skills of the autonomous unions in the face of the larger government union, which has historically claimed to be the sole legitimate voice of the worker. END SUMMARY.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS ON STRIKE: WHAT HAPPENED?

¶2. (C) On January 15, autonomous unions representing public employees from health, education and other sectors went on strike to protest the implementation of a November 2007 salary scale, which they said was inadequate for their needs. According to press reports, education workers represented the lion's share of the strikers. The strikers were joined in parallel by students from high schools and middle schools, who struck to focus government attention on their perceived heavy workload and inadequate school materials. An estimated 70 percent of teachers and students participated in the strike nationwide, which was largely peaceful. According to press reports, four students were arrested, while several students blocked roads with rocks and burning tires. Press reports also noted that some striking students were given flyers linked to an unknown person named "Hamza." The flyers, written in Arabic, contained Islamist slogans.

¶3. (C) Zoubida Yanat, a teacher at the Omar Racim high school in Algiers, told us January 20 that teachers had been considered the "new poor" for some time and that they had been "trying to send messages to the government saying that the crisis is really acute." Yanat added that, despite repeated attempts, the government had not responded to

teacher concerns and cautioned "this time, the authorities might understand that with this paralysis it is about time to deal seriously with the matter."

¶4. (C) On January 16, Slimane Mesbah, director of education for the wilaya (province) of Algiers, met with five student representatives, promising to convey their concerns to National Education Minister Boubekour Benbouzid. At the beginning of the strike, the students gave Benbouzid a deadline of January 26 to respond to their concerns or else the strike would continue indefinitely. Benbouzid, who has held his position for 18 years, waited several days to respond. When he did, he claimed that a political campaign against his reforms was at the root of the current student/teacher conflagration and alleged that the students had been manipulated into going on strike. He nonetheless made a general promise to address the students' concerns, and the majority of students across the country began returning to class by January 20.

THE IMMEDIATE FALLOUT FROM THE STRIKE

¶5. (C) For the first time, students from high schools, middle schools and primary schools went on strike together and on the same day. The synchronization among all the participants -- union members and students -- was unprecedented and many said the strike was the most successful the autonomous unions had ever mobilized. Striking students and teachers were joined by school administrative staff, effectively paralyzing the entire education sector.

¶6. (C) The government, which was notified of the strike before it occurred but did not grant official permission to

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conduct it, generally allowed the strikes to go forward without interference. Omar Belhouchet, editor-in-chief of the French-language daily El-Watan, told the Ambassador on January 22 that he viewed the government's restrained response to the strike as "more intelligent than it might have been," adding that the government did not want to provoke students. In addition, he said, and in contrast to student strikes in 1988, students were careful in 2008 to avoid violence.

¶7. (C) Sofiane Ait-Iflis, a reporter for French-language daily Le Soir d'Algerie, called the strike a "wonderful success" and said that the participation rate was 80 percent. Fatma Zohra Mansouri, principal of Algiers' largest high school and someone who did not wholeheartedly support the strike, estimated a participation rate closer to 50 percent. Mansouri confirmed to us January 20 that there was a problem with teacher salaries, but added that "there should also be a minimum of services so that the school year is not jeopardized."

AFTER THE STRIKE

¶8. (C) The strikes shed light on two important issues: the viability of the school year and the roles of unions. Ali Lamdani, Communication officer of the National Autonomous Council of the Secondary and Technical Teaching System (CNAPEST), one of the autonomous unions, told us January 20 that, in the short term, he believed the education ministry would have to postpone the normal February exams for high school students and condense some subjects such as math and philosophy. He said that high schools would have to make up lost days by arranging extra hours for students studying for their baccalaureate exam, the most important exam for high school students. Postponing or canceling the baccalaureate exam would be "a mess" for the education sector and would mean that students and teachers had lost a year of work, he added. If the strike were to resume and continue indefinitely, Lamdani said, it would be very difficult to

register new pupils throughout the entire education system.

¶9. (C) Focusing on the role of unions, Lorraine Clewer, director of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity in Algiers, told us January 20 that she had spoken to members of the autonomous unions and that they believed the strikes had been allowed by the government in order to neutralize the unions' power over the longer term. Clewer added that some people believed that the government was using the strikes as a release valve and that it would eventually step in and resolve the problems. This, she believed, would make the government look good and smooth things over before a referendum on a third term for President Bouteflika. Meanwhile, Yanat told us that the autonomous unions were "not only more organized but, let's face it, they are more effective" than the government's General Union of Algeria Workers (UGTA), which claims national membership of at least one million. Yanat concluded that "the teachers' community and UGTA have broken up for good."

¶10. (C) COMMENT: It is perhaps not surprising that the government's response to the students was muted, since given the current level of popular disenchantment it can ill afford to be seen beating or arresting high school students. However, the degree of participation among the various groups and the unprecedented level of coordination have people talking. Benbouzid has not yet delivered on his promise to address the students' concerns. If he doesn't, the nationwide general strike called for by the autonomous unions for February 10-12 will give the students another chance to voice their displeasure.
DAUGHTON